

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan, independent federal body, is seriously concerned about the riots between the Hindu and Christian religious communities in Kandhamal district, Orissa, which had particularly severe consequences on the minority Christian community: at least five people and possibly more have been killed, dozens injured, and over 500 displaced, including priests, nuns, and other individuals who reportedly remain in hiding. In addition, at least 400 homes and 20 churches were burned. In light of the frequency with which devastating acts of communal violence have occurred in India in recent years, the Commission fully supports the announcement by India's National Human Rights Commission to send an investigative team to Kandhamal to obtain first-hand information on the events there.

"A national-level investigation into the December 2007 violence in Orissa and subsequent prosecution will send a strong message to all that violence committed in the name of religion is never acceptable," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "The reported acts of violence against religious communities in Orissa are serious enough to warrant a national-level investigation and response."

The clashes erupted on December 24, 2007 and are the subject of conflicting reports. According to some sources, hundreds of members of a Hindu extremist group demanding that Christmas celebrations be halted attacked Christian individuals, churches, offices, and residences, destroying homes, looting shops, and injuring a number of individuals, and these actions were soon followed by retaliatory actions by Christians against Hindus. Other sources say the unrest began when Christians attacked a Hindu leader, while yet others allege that Christians erected religious statues at a Hindu religious site.

During the subsequent three days of rioting, 20 churches and an untold number of prayer houses and private residences belonging to both Hindus and Christians were destroyed. Although hundreds of national troops reportedly were sent to the region, the government of Orissa reportedly failed to act quickly-thereby enabling the violence to spread and perpetrators to escape accountability. Members of the minority Christian community allege that local police did not respond adequately to calls for help.

Religiously motivated violence has broken out before in Orissa. In 1999, Hindu extremists in Orissa murdered Australian Christian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons, a crime for which the perpetrator remains incarcerated. According to Indian news reports, some Indian officials claim that violence between Hindus and Christians has decreased since the murder. However, international human rights groups report that extremist Hindu groups for years have been conducting a sometimes violent campaign against Christians in Orissa that state government officials have done little to halt.

“The U.S. government should urge the government of India at the very least to ensure that the perpetrators of the recent Hindu-Christian violence in Orissa are held to account and to protect the safety of members of religious minorities in that state,” Cromartie said.

The U.S. government should also urge the Indian government to make more vigorous and effective efforts at the national level to stem violence against religious minorities. These efforts should include fulfillment of a 2004 pledge to criminalize inter-religious violence, and engagement in the pre-planning necessary to ensure that law enforcement officials can quell outbreaks of communal violence.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie

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